

Newark's surrender program offers fugitives clean start, conserves police resources

By Alexi Friedman/The Star-Ledger

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NEWARK -- William Costly has had a "black cloud" hanging over his head for years, though the 36-year-old Newark resident blames no one but himself.

Costly had open warrants out for his arrest in Essex and Union counties because of unpaid traffic tickets dating back to 1992. The fines piled up and the long shadow followed, he said, preventing him from getting a driver's license and a good job.



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William Costly, of Newark, right, waits in the gymnasium of Bethany Baptist Church in Newark. He was there to participate in the four day Fugitive Safe Surrender program, which provides a chance for people with warrants for non-violent offenses to surrender with little risk of jail time.

"I can't get the job I want. Can't do nothing with my record," he said.

Finally, Costly decided to get his life in order.

"I had no choice in the matter," he said.

On Wednesday morning, Costly walked into Bethany Baptist Church in Newark and surrendered to police. He did so on the first day of a four-day law enforcement effort that encourages fugitives with open warrants for nonviolent crimes to surrender, and most likely avoid jail time.

The program, called "Fugitive Safe Surrender," continues from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. today and tomorrow at the church on West Market Street. Court cases are heard at the nearby Priory building, headquarters of the outreach group New Community Corp.

Costly was in line by 6:30 a.m. and was one of the first to get processed and snag a chair in the church gym. There, he waited for a couple of hours as hundreds of other fugitives filed in.

Costly, who learned about the program through a teacher at his daughter's charter school, had racked up 20 traffic tickets over the years. Driving without a license during many of those police stops, Costly would be arrested and spend two or three days in jail.

By avoiding the fines, he acknowledged digging himself deeper in a financial hole because he was unable to land a job. Now, Costly wants a job as a tanker truck driver and believes safe surrender is the first step toward that goal.



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Police officers from many law enforcement agencies process research and warrants for those who participated in the Fugitive Safe Surrender program in Newark on Nov. 4.

The decision to face his past proved a good one, because a judge later dismissed several of the old charges against Costly, consolidated his fines and put him on a payment schedule. Most importantly, Costly said he will now be able to get his driver's license.

"I was a little leery about it at first," he said later. "But the program is excellent. It is what they say."

The U.S. Marshals Service directs the **nationwide initiative**, with the New Jersey Parole Board a partner in the Newark operation, along with more than 50 other agencies that take part. The program offers fugitives a clean start and saves taxpayers money by conserving police resources, Essex County Sheriff Armando Fontoura said.

Since Wednesday, a steady stream of mostly men has entered Bethany church. U.S. Marshal James Plousis, who leads the program, said numbers rise as word-of-mouth spreads. Tomorrow, the final day, is usually the heaviest. That was the case in **Camden last year, he said, when 2,245 people surrendered**; just nine were arrested.

Those who surrendered at Bethany church included fugitives with warrants for traffic violations, drug possession and failure to pay child support, officials said.

By the close of Thursday, 979 people had surrendered. Two people were also arrested, one for a robbery warrant from Mercer County, officials said. Information on the second arrest was not immediately available.

Plousis expects about 3,000 people to surrender over the course of the four days, fewer than the **5,000 that some local law enforcement officials had originally predicted**. He called

those numbers overly optimistic. Still, the total warrants cleared will be higher than the number of people who surrendered because each person usually walks in with two to three open warrants, Essex County Prosecutor Paula Dow said.

Deborah Gibbs was one of them.

A recovering heroin addict, who was arrested years ago in Union County for drug possession, Gibbs, 47, fled to Virginia in 2004 after receiving a notice she had violated her probation and faced jail time. Two years later, a second notice was sent, though that was never received.

Waiting in the church gym for her case to be called, Gibbs was nervous but resolute. "I feel better because this has been a weight that has been on my shoulders," she said.

Her case went very well, it turns out.

The judge dismissed all four warrants against Gibbs, but ordered her to pay \$1,500 in fines. The two warrants for probation violations carried a possible sentence of three year in prison.

"Oh, my God. Oh lord, it was wonderful. It was a blessing. I'm driving back home with a new sense of being," Gibbs said Thursday, adding she'll now apply for the job she had previously been afraid to go after. "I would tell everybody who has challenges, this opportunity is not to be passed up. Even if it had meant jail time, I was ready. Just being able to go and get this load off of you. It's so refreshing. I feel like a brand new person."

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